

The Arab Spring and a Liberal Analysis of US and EU Foreign Policies

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How has the Arab Spring Influenced the Foreign Policies of the United States and the European Union? Analyze from a Liberal Viewpoint.

In December 2010, a fruit seller set himself on fire in front of a government building in Tunisia. Shortly following, protests and demonstrations broke out in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. Little could he have known that his actions would be the symbolic spark to a growing anger in the Arab world. Demonstrations were set off like a line of fireworks, and soon after the fruit seller's death uprisings hit Egypt's Tahrir Square. It was the generation of young workers and college students who were rioting and protesting for a change, tired of unemployment and rising prices. Eyes turned to Egypt when it was clear that the people, tired of President Mubarak's long reign, would not rest until he stepped down.

As important actors in the Middle East and North Africa, the United States and the European Union's foreign policies towards the region are influenced by the Arab Spring. To be able to understand and critically analyze this, a study of United States and European Union foreign policies towards the Middle East and North Africa in the past must be conducted. The changes taking place in the Arab world must be handled carefully by these powerful actors, which seek to promote democracy, ensure access to oil, and promote successful trade policies.

The presented research will be closely aligned with the liberal paradigm; a theoretical perspective which "holds that human nature is basically good and that people can improve their moral and material conditions, making societal progress possible".[i] This theory holds that key actors are states, which have various interests, and international organizations; it views the international system as consisting of interdependence, international society and anarchy.[ii] This theory relates well to the interests that both the United States and the European Union have in the Middle East and North Africa.

Foreign aid is a crucial tool that the United States uses to advance its national interests in order to maintain the United States' primacy around the world as well as stability domestically. The major reasons that the United States conducts foreign aid are to benefit national security, commercial interests, and to address humanitarian concerns. Following 9/11, foreign aid has been seen foremost as a way to aid national security by containing and fighting terrorism to protect the United States and its allies from future attacks.[iii]

The United States government identifies terrorism as involving "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience." [iv] Providing a specific definition is difficult due to the nature of terrorism; "one person's 'terrorist' may be another's 'freedom fighter'". [v] For national security reasons the United States has been focused on reaching out to countries where known terrorist locations are, and initiating cooperation with governments. The United States has issued governments aid in the form of military training and equipment to help fight terrorist organizations. To take a closer look at U.S. foreign aid in the Middle East and North Africa, aid to two countries, Egypt and Israel, and the role it plays will be briefly examined.

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The United States recognizes that Egypt has played an active role in opposition to terrorism and is hopeful that this will influence other Arab countries to assume an active opposition as well.[vi] “In the past, other Arab states followed the Egyptian lead in turning to the Soviet Union for weapons, in nationalizing foreign interests, in land reform programs, in introducing democratic institutions, and in many other areas,” as stated by Jeremy Sharp in his analysis of relations between Egypt and the United States.[vii] It is also in the interest of the United States to maintain the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979 which initially involved the agreement that Israel would remove troops from the Sinai Peninsula in return for Egypt’s recognition of the state of Israel.[viii]

Today, there are speculations “that following upcoming elections, Egypt’s new rulers will revoke the Camp David Accords”.[ix] Some experts argue “that Egypt wants to maintain its flow of American financial aid and military equipment, and won’t do anything to jeopardize that”.[x] This statement should be re-looked at to take into consideration that as of 2010, both Egypt and the United States had “expressed the desire to graduate Egypt from U.S. bilateral economic assistance”.[xi] Now, how this will pan out after elections depends on many factors such as who comes into power, and just how determined Egypt is to break from the United States as well as if they can *afford* to cut their ties.

Egypt has also expressed this past interest in weaning itself off of United States assistance under Mubarak. It is important to mention that “the Muslim Brotherhood and the many Egyptians who back the group have repeatedly stated throughout the revolution that they have no interest in continuing their nation’s reliance on American backing, and that they view adherence to their radical Islamic ideals far more important than Western money”.[xii]

The question raised, therefore, is whether Egypt will seek a steady decline in assistance (as previously under Mubarak) or whether they are looking to sever ties in one clean cut (see Figure 1 for U.S. Aid to Egypt from 2000 to 2009). So, essentially, if Egypt breaks the treaty with Israel and if they sever financial ties with the United States, it would result in a decrease of American influence in not only Egypt, but the Middle Eastern region as a whole, given Egypt’s past role in the area. A decrease of influence may jeopardize the democratization of Egypt and neighboring states. This relates strongly to the liberalist view of the international system due to the fact that liberalists hold that within an interdependent system, the actors are “sensitive to and vulnerable to the actions of others”.[xiii]

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Figure 1: This graph provides a visual understanding of the decrease in United States foreign aid to Egypt in both economic and military terms. In the year 2000, total economic and military assistance to Egypt was \$2.58 billion, and the total assistance in 2009 was \$1.78 billion. The total assistance between 2000 and 2009 has decreased by \$797.2 million. This information along with the information provided by the graph were obtained electronically from the United States Agency for International Development.[xiv]

Another recipient of foreign aid from the United States is Israel. The United States' interest in Israel is based largely in fact that Israel is a strategic ally and it is the only country in the Middle East which is a democracy. It should also be mentioned that Israel is a nuclear power. U.S. and Israeli relations have deepened since the Cold War when they partnered up due to the commonality that they both had regarded the Soviet Union as an enemy. At first, the United States was hesitant in selling arms to Israel, fearing that it could lead to an arms race in the Middle East. However, the U.S. settled to give Israel a more "qualitative" edge in regards to arms.[xv]

According to an Obama Administration report, "U.S. assistance is also aimed at ensuring for Israel the security it requires to make concessions necessary for comprehensive regional peace".[xvi] Also in a 2010 Congressional Budget Justification it was stated that "Israel is a critical player in U.S. regional efforts to expand security and stability. Helping Israel maintain its qualitative military advantage enhances security by preventing regional conflict and builds the confidence necessary for Israel to take calculated risks for peace".[xvii]

The United States has traditionally pursued foreign policy in regions with rich energy resources but volatile relationships between states, to promote stability and peace. The U.S. has used foreign aid to draw military cooperation in the Middle East and discourage states from engaging in an arms race.[xviii] It is noted that "consensus among most analysts seems to be that U.S. economic and security aid has contributed significantly to Israel's security, Egypt's stability, and Jordan's friendship with the United States".[xix]

Today, United States aid to countries that are facing change in the Middle Eastern region has reflected hesitance and uncertainty. "While President Obama and European leaders have rhetorically backed the Egyptian and Tunisian people's overthrow of authoritarian leaders in favor of transitions to democracy, more concrete expressions of support have been lacking."[xx]

Funds have been provided to Egypt and Tunisia, however do not measure up to nearly enough for "sustainable development".[xxi]

The Europeans have also been cautious with the amount of aid they have been pledging to North Africa. "Intergovernmental organizations are needed to confront collective problems that individual countries cannot resolve on their own."[xxii] This supports the idea of cooperation between various states. As an intergovernmental organization, the European Union is reaching out bilaterally to assist in the democratization of Arab countries. The United Kingdom recently agreed to contribute \$180 million to assist Arab countries in democratic reform in addition to the \$350 million that Germany decided to cancel in Egyptian debt.[xxiii] France has also agreed to contribute with \$260 million loans, adding to bilateral European support. [xxiv]

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has the intention of investing a maximum of \$3.5 billion, and the European Union is investing \$1.75 million for the development and expansion of its European Neighborhood Policy.[xxv]

The European Neighborhood Policy was created in 2004 to promote economic and trade initiatives among Europe and its neighbors.[xxvi] Why is the ENP important? It is because "recent events along the Southern Mediterranean" have persuaded a review of this policy.[xxvii] The review has come up with four new aims: to "provide greater support to partners engaged in building deep democracy", to "support inclusive economic development", to "strengthen the two regional dimensions of the European Neighborhood Policy, covering respectively the Eastern Partnership and the Southern Mediterranean", and to "provide the mechanisms and instruments fit to deliver these objectives".[xxviii] The ENPI has set an allocated budget for Egypt for the period of 2011-2013 (see Figure 2 for budget details).[xxix]

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“In April 2008 Egypt requested to begin a process of enhancing relations with the E.U., through further intensifying political dialogue, reinforcing trade and economic relations, and strengthening co-operation in a range of sectors.”[xxx] These relations are critical to the liberalist view of interdependence. Promoting a weave of interdependency ensures that each actor is, in a blunt way, somehow tied to that of the other. It creates a level of trust and responsibility. A possible conflict that could arise would be that if one actor choses to act in self-interest and disregards the collective interest then it may spoil this interdependency and create mistrust as well as a security dilemma. It is vital to take a critical look at both the benefits and risks of interdependency because although liberals tend to focus on social and economic interests and issues, they also do not disregard security issues.[xxxi]

Figure 2: This chart shows the distribution of the ENPI allocated budget for Egypt in the period of 2011-2013. The total budget is €449.29 million and is divided into three priorities: (1) “Supporting Egypt’s reforms in the areas of democracy, human rights, good governance and justice” 11.1%; (2) “Developing the competitiveness and productivity of the Egyptian economy” 42.2%; and (3) “Ensuring the sustainability of the development process with effective social, economic and environmental policies and better management of natural resources” 46.7%.[xxxii]

An important concept to note which influences both the United States and European Union’s foreign policy is that of

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democracy. It is a common theme, and now that the Arab Spring introduced revolutions across the Arab world, this moment provides a great opportunity for the United States and the European Union to promote one of their top values: democracy. The spread of democracy could possibly eliminate wars and change international politics according to Immanuel Kant. [xxxiii] "Whereas democratic governments often wage wars against repressive or autocratic states, they have maintained a democratic peace with each other." [xxxiv] Democracy is also a major objective of the European Union's political project. [xxxv]

"It is not sufficient to provide support for establishing democratic and rule-of-law structures in third countries – the main challenge is to make these norms part of the mental structures of elites and the population in the third country. Sustainable results not only require the potential for clear gain on the part of the third country but also a strong endogenous basis to make long-term structural changes and an internalization of norms and values possible. This is also one of the reasons that the EU has aimed 'to encourage a socialization of identities around a positive adherence to democratic norms, while directing political aid towards strengthening the broad socio-economic foundations of sustainable democracy rather than particular institutional patterns.'" [xxxvi]

This supports why the European Union has insisted in providing socio-economic aid to Arab countries which have undergone a revolution: to encourage development of democratic foundations whereas a large portion of aid from the United States has been given to support military and security issues (See Figure 1 for military aid given to Egypt).

The United States links the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 indirectly with "a dictatorial regime overseas". [xxxvii] The invasion of Iraq can be justified, as George W. Bush has done, by the belief that the United States was trying to bring "democracy – and peace – to the Middle East". [xxxviii] Another example of the United States effort to promote democracy in the Middle East is in Bahrain. The elections in Bahrain this past September 2011 resulted in 18 new members being elected to parliament. Bahrain underwent unrest and change during the Arab Spring, and now is the chance for the United States to make an impact on them and steer them in the right direction in their path to democracy. [xxxix] Journalist Tom Squitieri said, "Glass half full or half empty? In Bahrain, the reality is the glass is broken". [xl] It is true that Bahrain is a fairly small state and considered a province of Iran, but this 'island' has been greatly influenced by those in Washington giving the United States an open window to promote democracy in this region. [xli]

Liberalism, as a theoretical frame of analysis, is known to link peace with democracy. Following 9/11, George W. Bush was prompted to go to war to fight and end terrorism by "promoting democracy in the Middle East". [xlii] "The Western approach to peace building in societies torn by civil war is intervening to, in part, promote rule of law, political parties, elections, an active media, and civil rights as the proper recipe for creating stable societies and responsible governments." [xliii]

The Arab Spring is undoubtedly influencing the foreign policy of the United States and the European Union. To even begin understanding how this is happening, a multifaceted approach must be employed. Taking into consideration the information already presented on foreign policy interests and foreign aid in the Middle East and North Africa, a discussion can follow.

The immediate reactions at the start of the Arab Spring were telling with regard to what world leaders were thinking. The United States had supported Egypt's Mubarak's regime for so long that it was hesitant in taking the side of the rebels. Only after it was clear that the people of Egypt would not back down, did the United States voice its opinion for Mubarak to step down. It was a confusing time, as Washington kept a close eye on the revolt. Egypt's revolution prompted a domino effect for other Arab countries under dictatorships, forcing the world to re-look at what their definition of stability and peace was as well as double check on their interests in the region. Nobody at the time knew what would happen next, and certainly today the outlook is still dubious.

The United States was forced to rethink their support of Mubarak, a clear sign that they were taking another look at their foreign policy interests and approaches. As the domino effect rippled through the Arab world both the United States and members of the European Union put their support in the rebels hopeful that a revolution would spark change. They were also hopeful that once the dictatorships were overthrown, it would lay down the next brick in

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building the road to democracy in the region. Just as with their hesitancy in responding to the Egyptian revolution, the United States faces the challenge of deciding what it can and cannot support in the Middle East and North African region.[xliv] With the experience of invading Iraq, the United States has seen that it is fairly difficult to set up a new government in a country with a toppled dictatorship, and that right there is enough reason to reconsider that aspect of foreign policy.[xlv] Should outside states get involved and if so, to what extent?

Factors influencing the United States and European Union's foreign policies in the Middle East and North Africa include the area and amount foreign aid distributed and a shared interest in the promotion of democracy. The European Union could take the Arab Spring as an opportunity to further develop their European Neighborhood Policy in that region. This kind of relationship would increase interdependency and promote the establishment of democratic regimes. It would be supporting the ideas of liberalism in that way as well. In terms of the United States, it would seem that, at least for the moment, they do not quite have the same opportunity as the E.U. because many Arab states are not very open to U.S. interference, as demonstrated with Egypt. They can however play a hand in promoting democracy in Bahrain which has been open to, and possibly welcomed, influence from the United States.

Revolutions inspire change, or rather change can inspire revolutions. The United States and the European Union have seen that the Arab people were strong enough to fight against their oppressive regimes and that they are not going to be as receptive, as say Mubarak, to outside aid and influence. The approaches that the United States and the European Union have taken in the region have been different; however, they are linked in some ways. It is true that when the U.S. went into Iraq, it most likely did not expect to stay in there as long as it did. Establishing a new government after its people have been living under a violent dictatorship is difficult — both time and financially consuming. With the occurrence of the Arab Spring, the United States will have to rethink their approach to promoting democracy and what would be the best way to do it. The European Union can see this as an opportunity to establish new, stronger economic relationships to benefit both sides. For now, time will play an active role in determining what will happen next in the Middle East and North Africa. The European Union and the United States have many things to consider in terms of foreign policy in the region and the views presented here are related to a liberal viewpoint as well as highlight important concepts such as terrorism, international organizations and democracy.

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